

4.10 AESTHETIC/VISUAL RESOURCES

Visual or aesthetic resources are generally defined as both the natural and built features of the landscape that contribute to the public's experience and appreciation of the environment. Depending on the extent to which a project's presence would alter the perceived visual character and quality of the environment, a visual or aesthetic impact may occur. This analysis of potential visual effects is based on a review of proposed Project maps, aerial and ground-level photographs of the proposed Project area, and planning documents.

4.10.1 Environmental Setting

The Project area lies in north central California, in southwest Sacramento County and north San Joaquin County. The proposed pipeline route would, for the most part, run alongside the existing Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR) and span approximately 11 miles, from the Thornton Station, just south of the Mokelumne River to the Elk Grove Station, just south of Elk Grove Boulevard. The views of the proposed Project area are of a very flat landscape composed of pastoral grasslands, agricultural lands, rural residences, newer residential subdivisions at the northern end of the Project area, and two nature preserve areas. However, the majority of the visual setting is dominated by farmlands, and as a result the visual features are mostly cultural modifications to the landscape. Along the majority of the proposed pipeline route, the foreground and middle-ground views visible to 3 to 5 miles are dominated by large parcels of agrarian rows and fields in fallow, the Union Pacific railroad line and ballast, as well as existing electrical transmission lines and associated equipment. Large watercourses or riparian vegetation, which is typically associated with high visual quality, are seldom seen or are blended within the distant background views.

As mentioned above, two nature preserve areas are located within segments of the proposed Project area. The Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge is located in the northern portion of the Project area and is made up of various types of habitats, including wetlands, grasslands, woodlands and savannas, and riparian corridors (PG&E 2006). The majority of the acreage associated with this refuge is located north of Interstate 5 (I-5), which is approximately 1.5 to 2.0 miles west of the proposed pipeline route. Viewsheds of the refuge along this portion of the proposed route between Bilby Road and Elk Grove Boulevard are characterized by flat topography, open space, annual grasslands, seasonal wetlands, vernal pools, and drainages, which are intermixed with distant views of I-5, agrarian flatlands, and residential developments.

The Cosumnes River Preserve, located at the southern portion of the proposed Project area along the Cosumnes and Mokelumne Rivers, is known for providing an excellent example of valley oak riparian habitat (PG&E 2006). The viewsheds of the preserve along the southern first 1.3 miles of the proposed pipeline route are of riparian woodlands, riparian scrub, grasslands, and seasonal wetlands.

A nonfunctional bridge, which has historically held a portion of the original Line 108 pipeline, spans the Cosumnes River near the proposed pipeline route (PG&E 2006). The existing pipeline bridge acts as an impediment to viewsheds from travelers along Franklin Boulevard and elsewhere within the preserve.

Scenic Routes

There are no designated State Scenic Highways in the San Joaquin County or Sacramento County portion of the proposed pipeline route. However, within the county, Interstate 5 (I-5) is locally designated as a scenic route from the Sacramento County line to Stockton (San Joaquin County 1992). The Thornton Meter Station, where the proposed pipeline route begins, is located approximately one mile east of I-5; however, the proposed Project route and above ground facilities would not be within sight of this scenic route.

Twin Cities Road, which is designated by Sacramento County as a scenic corridor from State Route 160 to State Route 99, crosses the proposed Project area (Sacramento 1974). According to Section 335-36(o) of the Sacramento County Zoning Code, this stretch of Twin Cities Road is designated as a Special Sign Corridor and is subject to sign regulations that compliment surrounding areas in an aesthetic manner (PG&E 2006).

4.10.2 Regulatory Setting

Federal

There are no Federal regulations related to aesthetics that are relevant to the Project.

State

California Department of Transportation

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) administers the State Scenic Highway Program to preserve and protect scenic highway corridors from change that

would diminish the aesthetic value of lands adjacent to highways (California Streets and Highways Code Sections 260 et seq). The State Scenic Highway System includes a list of highways that are either eligible for designation as scenic highways or have been so designated. These highways are identified in Streets and Highways Code Section 263. The program entails the regulation of land use and density of development, attention to the design of sites and structures, attention to and control of signage, landscaping, and grading, and the undergrounding of utility lines within the view corridor of designated scenic roadways. The local jurisdiction is responsible for adopting and implementing such regulation. If a highway is listed as eligible for official designation, it is also part of the Scenic Highway System and care must still be taken to preserve its eligible status.

Local

Sacramento County General Plan

The following objectives and policies related to aesthetics from the Sacramento County General Plan were considered in this analysis:

Energy Facilities Policies (Section VIII)

PF-71. Locate and design production and distribution facilities so as to minimize visual intrusion problems in urban areas and areas of scenic and/or cultural value including the following:

- Recreation and historic areas;
- Scenic highways;
- Landscape corridors;
- State or Federal designated wild and scenic rivers;
- Visually prominent locations such as ridges, designated scenic corridors, and open viewsheds; and
- Native American sacred sites.

PF-72. Locate and design energy production and distribution facilities in a manner that is compatible with surrounding land uses by employing the following methods when appropriate to the site:

- Visually screen facilities with topography and existing vegetation and install landscaping consistent with surrounding land use zone development standards where appropriate, except where it would adversely affect photovoltaic performance or interfere with power generating capability;
- Provide site-compatible landscaping;
- Minimize glare through siting, facility design, nonreflective coatings, etc.; and

- Site facilities in a manner to equitably distribute their visual impacts in the immediate vicinity.

Scenic Highways Goals

1. To preserve and enhance the aesthetic quality of scenic roads without encouraging unnecessary driving by personal automobile.

Scenic Highways Objectives

1. To retain designation of the River Road (State Highways 160 and 84) as an Official State Scenic Highway and to preserve and enhance its scenic qualities.
3. To extend County scenic corridor protection to additional specific scenic roads in the rural portions of the County.
4. To strengthen the provisions of scenic corridor regulations so as to further protect the aesthetic values of the County's freeways and scenic roads.

Scenic Highways Policies

1. To strengthen the scenic corridor provisions of the Zoning Code to require design review of all signs and other structures within the corridor.
3. To fully enforce all sign controls in the scenic corridors.
4. To retain the scenic qualities of scenic corridors by avoiding unnecessary widening, straightening, or major reconstruction of scenic routes.
10. To provide scenic corridor protection for Scott Road from White Rock Road south to Latrobe Road, Michigan Bar Road, and Twin Cities Road from Highway 160 east to Highway 99.
17. To investigate in coordination with other County agencies the provision of distinctive planting schemes, vista points, and picnic areas along scenic corridors.

San Joaquin County General Plan

The following objectives and policies related to aesthetics from the San Joaquin County General Plan were considered in this analysis:

Open Space Objectives (Chapter VI)

1. To preserve open space land for the continuation of commercial agricultural and productive uses, the enjoyment of scenic beauty and recreation, the protection and use of natural resources, and for protection from natural hazards.

Open Space Policies (Chapter VI)

10. Views of waterways, hilltops, and oak groves from public land and public roadways shall be protected.

12. The County should recognize the roads shown in Figure VI-2 as scenic routes and as valuable in enhancing the recreational experience for County residents and non-residents. Criteria for selection of additional routes should specify that the route:

- a. leads to a recreational area,
- b. provides a representative sampling of the scenic diversity within the County,
- c. exhibits unusual natural or man-made features of interest,
- d. provides opportunities to view the Delta waterways, and
- e. links two scenic routes or connects with scenic routes of cities or other counties.

13. Development proposals along scenic routes shall not detract from the visual and recreational experience.

Recreation Policies (Chapter IV)

23. Scenic corridors along the recreation trailways and scenic routes shall be protected from unsightly development.

4.10.3 Significance Criteria

An adverse impact on aesthetic/visual resources is considered significant and would require mitigation if the proposed Project would:

- Cause inconsistency with adopted visual resource management (VRM) plans or local ordinances. In those areas where no VRM plans exist, impacts were determined by examining the study area for sensitive viewsheds, areas of high user volumes, and areas of unique visual resources. Sensitive resources were then examined on a case-by-case basis to determine the level of impact. Significant visual impacts would be those that dominate the viewshed from sensitive locations and change the character of the landscape both in terms of physical characteristics and land uses;
- Result in a substantial adverse effect on a scenic area or vista;
- Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a State scenic area or highway;
- Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings; or
- Create a new source of substantial light or glare that would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

4.10.4 Impact Analysis and Mitigation

No Applicant Proposed Measures (APMs) have been identified by PG&E relevant to this section.

1 **Impact Discussion**

2 No scenic vistas designated in Sacramento County or San Joaquin County general
3 plans are located within close proximity to the Project area. Project construction would
4 primarily occur across level agricultural lands and would be temporary in nature.
5 Further, no Federal or State designated scenic resources are visible from within the
6 Project area. For example, State Route 160, which is approximately 5 miles from the
7 Project area, is designated as a State Scenic Highway and is not visible from the
8 Project area.

9 The only permanent above-ground features associated with the Project would be 8-foot
10 high pipeline markers located along the pipeline route and a pressure limiting station
11 just south of the existing Elk Grove Station at the northern end of the proposed route.
12 Several valve extensions, actuators, valve hand wheels, risers, meters, and Supervisory
13 Control and Data Acquisition equipment and other appurtenances would be within and
14 adjacent to the existing facilities at Thornton, Franklin, and Elk Grove Stations (PG&E
15 2006). Pipeline markers already exist along the existing Line 108 route. Given the
16 relatively small size of the markers and the introduction of additional equipment within
17 and adjacent to existing stations, the Project would not cause a marked change in the
18 visual character of the existing landscape. No new source of visual glare or substantial
19 light would be expected to occur due to the proposed Project.

20 It does not appear that any mechanisms to cause impacts to visual resources would
21 result from the proposed Project. Therefore, no impacts to visual resources would be
22 expected.

23 **4.10.5 Impacts of Alternatives**

24 **No Project Alternative**

25 The No Project Alternative would not result in the construction and operation of a
26 natural gas pipeline between the Elk Grove and Thornton Stations. Therefore, there
27 would be no mechanism to cause visual impacts. As discussed above, no impacts
28 would result from the proposed Project.

29 **Franklin 1 Alternative**

30 Under the Franklin 1 Alternative, no additional above-ground features or other
31 components that may cause visual impacts would result that differ from the proposed
32 Project. Therefore, there would be no impacts to visual resources under this alternative.

1 **Franklin 2 Alternative**

2 From an aesthetics perspective, the Franklin 2 Alternative would not be different than
3 the Franklin 1 Alternative. There would be no aesthetic impacts related to the
4 implementation of the Franklin 2 Alternative.

5 **Project without Bridge Replacement Alternative**

6 The Project without Bridge Replacement Alternative would leave the historic suspension
7 bridge in place. The suspension bridge is an existing part of the baseline visual setting.
8 From all other aesthetics perspectives, the Project without Bridge Replacement
9 Alternative would not be different than the proposed Project. There would be no
10 aesthetic impacts related to the implementation of the Project without Bridge
11 Replacement Alternative.

12 **4.10.6 Cumulative Projects Impact Analysis**

13 The existing visual quality of the Project area is influenced by historical and current land
14 uses, including commercial and residential development, transmission lines, pipelines,
15 recreational uses, and agriculture. Because no impacts to visual resources would be
16 expected from the proposed Project, there would be no cumulative impacts to visual
17 resources.

